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Theatre of Pleasure: Monologues on Body in Ismut Chughtai's Lihaaf (The Quilt)

Abstract: Seventy seven years ago, when feminist Urdu writer Ismut Chughtai brought out her homosexual story 'Lihaaf (Quilt)', protests broke out everywhere in the country. Though the story sent tremors across the continent and Chughtai had to face an 'obscenity trial' later, 'Lihaaf' still remains a masterpiece in the history of Urdu literature. The story is embedded with a medley of words which seeks its cultural possibility that it attains immensely and the sculpture, the body of the central character shown as much as it is seen by another desiring woman who keeps consoling about the casual (itching) as something she can overcome with the illustrious, exquisite massaging act. The subtext happens hidden and accidental at once and is revealed through the eyes of an adolescent whose initiation to sexual pleasure, a situation of intense remorse happening along with it. The celebration of body due to deprivation and splendour metamorphose into sexual love, emerging as a continuation of emotionality. The story is a lesbian defence of Chughtai, bold instance of radical feminist politics. My paper analyses how body speaks in the triumph of love among the three women characters with repetitive accidentality visible throughout the story. I also analyse Begum Jaan as an image of a new woman free from the shackles of patriarchy and articulating a new gendered consciousness.

Keywords: Body, Female Sexuality, Lesbian Continuum, Psycho Analytical Feminism, Stand Point

1. Introduction

On September 7 2018, in a landmark verdict, the Supreme Court of India decriminalised Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and allowed gay sex among consenting individuals. Be that as it may, homosexuality is still a taboo in India. When *Lihaaf* was published in 1941, Chughtai was possibly the first woman writer of modern India who wrote about a homosexual relationship. It was quite scandalous for a time when women lived a veiled life. The story illustrates an erotic relationship between a sexually deprived woman and her servant. The narrative unravels elements involving homosexuality, sexual discrimination, intersectionality etc. Bold, daring, progressive, scandalous, even obscene are some of the adjectives popularly used to describe Chughtai's work. An Indian woman is not expected to talk about her (or his) body, desire and sexuality. Chughtai was constantly daring to raise these secluded issues in her writings. Though '*Lihaaf*' landed her in the midst of a raging social controversy, Chughtai continued her writing in a rebellious tone and a feminist voice. Chughtai's formidable stride of discussing woman's sexuality in her works, enabled people to see that it is possible for women to explore and to write "bold" stories and paved the way for a succeeding generation of women writers.

2. Background

The discussions on homosexuality came into light only in the late 19th century Europe when sex and sexuality became acceptable in academic circles (Devdutt, 2017). However, the sculptures on exterior walls of temples like Boramdeo (Chattisgarh, India), Konark (Odisha, India) and lesbian encounters from Khajuraho group of monuments (Madhya Pradesh, India)

signifies a sexually liberal society in India. Certain postulates give insight that the ancient Indian Vedic system might have allowed marriage between homosexuals.

In medieval Christian theology, if the sexual union did not result in the insemination of the woman, it was considered to be “a sin against nature”. The primary motive of such ‘unnatural’ acts was only pleasure and not procreation (Turner, 2008). The term ‘homosexual’ appeared only in the 1946 revised standard version of the bible and was never seen in Biblical Greek or Hebrew (Cannon, 2011)

During the mughal rule, acts of homosexuality and paedophilia amongst the mughal nobility were delineated in many historic texts (Chowdary, 2001). At the height of Islamic golden age, same – sex relations were openly practised in Muslim societies. The love poetries of Abu Nuwas explore the Islamic notions of homosexuality (Habib, 2010).

3. Body Monologues in ‘Lihaaf’

Human body has certain biological needs for survival. In the western religious dictum, sex was only meant for procreation. All other means of pleasure, such as masturbation, homosexualities were all to be punished. Sex was also used as a means of conditioning women and men to stay within the domains of the social system. In the modern era, it was about the physical need and domination of the supreme male. The sexual instincts of the women were never discussed. Hence marriage becomes merely a contract and the marriage bed was devoid of pleasure. Since procreative activities were confined to these contractual unions in marriage, desire had to find its location elsewhere.

“After marrying Begum Jan and installing her in the house along with the furniture, the Nawab Sahib totally forgot her presence, leaving the frail young Begum to pine in loneliness.”(Tharu, 1991. p. 130)

Begum Jaan of “Lihaaf” is an example of deviance from the natural order. Begum Jaan has covered her unnatural existence with a ‘quilt’ but society is such a powerful force that it breaks through the walls. The very objects from which one hides one’s actions, becomes the informer of one’s deeds. The helpless woman was forced to fulfill the desperate needs of her body by engaging in an unnatural relation with her maid servant. Through lihaaf, Ismut also brings to forefront the plight of young ladies suppressing their desires for a full and free life under the veil in a traditional Muslim aristocratic family. Lihaaf is widely criticized for its open sexuality and pornographic content. But the story is centralized on the life of a neglected wife under the eyes of a child. The child was sent to learn the ways of proper femininity and what she learnt was the bodily delicacies of two women. The story passes through both male and female homoeroticism, but feminine sex, in writing and reality, cannot be accepted.

The setting of the story “Lihaaf” and its direct effect to bring the body as a speaking presence is the topic of discussion. Through its experiences of pleasure how probably in Indian situation such a direct presentation of this is happening, whether the narration could be on those details which sound as a kind of narration of a celebration. Festivities, festivals and carnivals were historical occasions for orgiastic release. They were suppressed by puritans and later the capitalists. These collective festivals later paved way to much more individualised and private past times. The whole of life becomes monotonous, dull and disciplined.

When talking about a celebration or festival, a festival is actually a sight of scattered pleasant happenings. There could be something central to that about a deity or commemoration of a particular thing. But people come, move around and shop, engage in different games. It is also an assembly where people, who occasionally meet are coming in a sense of gaiety, accidental bumping into each other, and lot of unexpectedness around the surroundings of a public sphere, of a celebration. So how far is this resemblance to that celebration of joy? The conversational progress relating to the maid - the black, ugly short maid and the beautiful

Begum Jaan tries to show the illustration of a festival. The young woman, whose initiation to bodily pleasures which she takes with a kind of repentance in the first sense, changes in the later part of the story. The narration deals with such experiences in a peculiar manner. The frustrated lady in feudal house is not breaking moral code of a feudal patriarchal family to invite any of the male members to satisfy the desire. The lady outwardly followed the patriarchal norms and possesses all the traits necessary for a virtuous woman in a patriarchal set-up. However, within the zenana, she couldn't hide her sexual desires. Begum Jaan, hence, uses her sexuality as an instrument for her empowerment. As much accidental as the younger woman remembers about the context in which she is becoming part of that act and its very important to see how the child is developing an element of anxiety or fear towards an object, the quilt, an exciting sexual desire or anxiety.

4. The Quest for Love

The relationship between the three female protagonists is delineated as a sexual/ erotic love. The different categories of love had been clearly marked on the public perceptions of different forms of love as Eric Fromm describes in his "Art of loving".

"Man is gifted with reason; he is life being aware of itself; he has awareness of himself, of his fellow man..." (Fromm, 2006. p.6).

He describes the deepest roots of our yearning for love.

"being lovable is essentially a mixture of being popular and having sex appeal" (Fromm, 2006. p.2)

At the same time we have different treatises on love which talks about the conversational or kind of possibilities that enhances mutual love on account of intense sexual conjugal celebration. So that act is to be seen as an act of love in a broader sense than merely sex itself. Sexual activity cannot be separated from the whole act of love when two people are deeply into

it that it is a natural thing. Begum Jaan and Rabbu never engage in any promises or claims to be in love. The mistress used the maid to satisfy her cravings and the maid used the body to get favours from mistress as well as enjoy the pleasures of an accepted fair body. The word 'love' never comes anywhere in the story. However, a deepset erotic love does exist all throughout the story.

The Zenana in the story is denotive of private secluded space and that whatever happens there is not supposed to be known or communicated, not for its secrecy but as part of an internal arrangement that says its conversations are not traded in everyday normal practices. At the same time you have other spaces where men or sometimes in a very unimportant way children taking place. In the case of men, it could be a smoking room or in a traditional sense, could be a club house where they have games or in a rural traditional situation, it could be even a reading room where men are only supposed to enter, remain and engage.

If there exists a secluded place like this, for example, of women being collectively enjoying the situation of a post breakfast morning where men leave for work and women do lot of talking about the past, the present and the future in terms of very material things of cooking and other household chores. This feudal house has a secluded space where women, but a private space with specific mark of power of Beegum, and her servant and a little girl whose adoration to the Begum itself is the marker of up and love, in terms of dignity and the perceived potential of the body in terms of the Sexual capacity. This work is probably talking about bringing that private life into public where the latter is not supposed to know about what is happening in the private as much as the state is interested in the intricacies of the personal, financial, commercial deal of the person. It is also trying to device several instrumentalities to know about what is happening with the person of financial transaction in order to control the legitimate action so that nothing illegal is happening. In our times we live in a permitted space and at the same time

we also live under the grand umbrella of a plethora of beliefs which is actually codified into a kind of document that assures us all our rights.

When we talk about the gaze of the state in terms of this corrective purpose of intervening into our every day activities, how does the activity of sex that happens in a zenana is not supposed to be revealed. But what happens here is a kind of revelation into a society where such narratives are considered as pornographic that actually stops pornography as accepted social text. It has got tremendous illustrations; the diversity in which people seek desire, sexual pleasure and the agency through which their mental and physical satisfaction is achieved is probably unfair and lawful activity according to the custom of their own society.

Begum finds it difficult to expose her sexual choice into the large society about the likes and dislikes and the ways in which the consent is manufactured for that matter. Consent building exercise is primal thing that keeps people away from discussing erotic experiences and labeling themselves as a kind of Pornographic practice of censoring selves may be a practice of that exists in a society, but the person is not really aware of that. This self censoring mechanism is a conscious act of self determination to stop the thing happened.

Liberty and dynamism struggle to hold their footing as tradition and stagnation perpetuate to inundate. The same country that strives to ascertain absolute safety for its women conveniently ignores an act as gruesome as marital rape. There is a global divide in homosexuality. There exists a powerful relationship between a country's religiosity and opinions about same –sex relations.

5. Conclusion

The Indian society believes same sex relationship is a western import and considers it as a criminal offence. The description of sodomy in the Kamasutra, or the references of same sex relationship in Ramayana and Mahabharat shows that same sex love was common in ancient

India. Women in modern India perceive their bodies are meant to work and satisfy their husbands' sexual needs. They keep aside their desires and physical harassment in the making of a peaceful family. She could not satisfy her sexual thirst and hides her lipstick laden lips under the burqa, leading a different life. Indian concepts on sexuality should be brought for a wider discussion and women should start coming into public and talk about sexuality without social care.

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